

Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform Hearing
“The Perplexing Shift from Shortage to Surplus: Managing This Season’s Flu Shot
Supply and Preparing for the Future”
February 10, 2005

Good morning. I want to welcome everyone to today’s oversight hearing regarding the U.S. influenza vaccine supply. This hearing will consider how public perceptions and needs will be managed and addressed for the remainder of this flu season and discuss what actions are being taken to begin planning for next year’s flu season.

As many of you know, this flu season has been an unusual and difficult one. As a result of last fall’s vaccine shortage, millions of healthy people and thousands in the high-risk population were unable to get vaccinated. Phones at doctors’ offices, clinics and hospitals rang off the hook with questions of where to seek flu vaccine, and hundreds of clinics were either forced to turn people away or cancel altogether.

Public health authorities responded immediately, demonstrating coordination and cooperation between federal, state and local public health officials and private providers. Officials scrambled to identify and prioritize groups for vaccination and redistribute vaccine to areas where none existed. They were also able to procure additional vaccine from foreign sources to help compensate for the loss of Chiron’s vaccine. The two remaining Food and Drug Administration (FDA) licensed flu vaccine manufacturers increased production capabilities to maximize the number of doses produced for this season.

Recently, the nation’s flu vaccine shortage turned into a surplus with approximately 4.4 million doses remaining to be administered. The current surplus has led to confusion among Americans, with immunization recommendations varying from state to state and uncertainties of where ample supplies of vaccine exist. As the peak of the flu season approaches, it appears demand for the flu vaccine has all but disappeared and the public has lost motivation to get vaccinated. Only a few months ago our senior citizens were waiting for hours in long lines to get vaccinated, and now there are no lines at all.

We cannot afford for Americans to underestimate the seriousness of the flu or take the importance of vaccination against the flu lightly. An unconcerned public will only prove to make future flu seasons more difficult. Vaccines are life saving devices and administering them is an easy way to prevent contracting and spreading a disease.

At previous Committee hearings, we have discussed proposed solutions to fixing the supply side of the equation. We have considered whether new mechanisms and incentives are necessary to guarantee that an adequate number of safe and effective flu vaccines are produced and delivered annually. Today, we also need to consider the demand side of the equation. Without a steady demand from a public that is confident

the flu vaccine will be available to them each year, precious vaccine will be thrown out at the end of each flu season.

Questions continue to mount, and hopefully today some will be answered. How did we go from a shortage of vaccine to a surplus in just a matter of months? What happened to demand for vaccine? Are new public awareness campaigns or programs needed to increase and stabilize demand for the flu vaccine? What are we doing now to minimize the amount of vaccines thrown away at the end of this flu season? As we approach next year's flu season, will the message on who should be vaccinated change again? We also need to consider if new mechanisms and incentives are necessary to guarantee that an adequate number of safe and effective flu vaccines are produced and delivered annually.

I look forward to our witness testimony today and a constructive dialogue on this matter. I've said this before and reiterate today: we all share the same goal at the end of the day – a public health system prepared to deal with the annual influenza season. Let's not let the efforts to respond to this season's flu shot shortage be in vain. Everyone should continue to seek immunization as it is not too late and the flu season has yet to peak. As you will hear our witnesses testify, there are still at least two more months of the flu season.

As a result, I am pleased to announce that today in Rayburn 2247 from 1:00-3:00pm, the George Washington Medical Faculty Associates will be sponsoring a flu shot clinic. This clinic is open to anyone and the shot is free of charge. I would encourage those who chose to forgo receiving a flu shot because of the shortage to take advantage of this important opportunity. The Committee thanks the George Washington Medical Faculty Associates for offering to sponsor the clinic and for its continuing motivation to protect the public by encouraging flu vaccination.